

“Black Swan”: New Greatness, False Europe and the Ukraine Crisis (2002–2014)

Previous chapters have shown how the practical elements of Russian identity and the web of its multiple Others (European, Barbarian, and Internal) shaped Russian-European security interactions in the Balkans and Black Sea region. In particular, we have seen how the intermediate Other (idealistic, weak, and incompetent Civilising Europe) can explain Russia’s attitude towards the EU and the mixed record of their interactions in the conflict resolution processes concerning Moldova and Georgia. This chapter will take these findings a step further. It will apply the above-exposed model to analyse Russian-European interactions in other cases and dimensions. The first section will reveal a very important process, which was set off by President V. Putin from his first days as president. Namely, it will expose his attempt at redefining Russia’s Powerhood in the terms of Western normalcy, i.e. greatness through competitive economies and prosperity. I will argue that this process led to a fundamental shift in EU-Russian relations. Although initially invisible, this move created a new discursive field wherein Russia started reading Europe through the lens of economic competition. In the second section, I will also argue that a more sceptical attitude towards the EU was coupled with a new reflective turn in Russia’s self-perception. Not only did Russian policy-makers gain a more realist and geo-economic perspective of the European Union—as the body dominated by False and Sinful Europe—but they also gradually gained a striking insight into the process of discursive identity construction and social constructionist theories.

One could say that Western academic discourse produced its own Frankenstein—Russian policy-makers and diplomats started to operate with the terms “True” and “False” Europe and apply sophisticated concepts of critical theory to their analyses of EU-Russian relations and international politics. This deconstruction of the idea of Europe led to a further escalation of competitive geo-economic perceptions of the EU in Moscow. As a result, these two cognitive shifts constituted more conflictual policy choices as thinkable and imaginable for Russian policy makers.

The third section will argue that, even though Moscow gained a highly critical attitude toward the European Union, the idea of Europe is still believed to be useful for the regional integration. The launch of the Eurasian Economic Union was an attempt to use positive features of the European integration in order for Russia to claim the same right to decide and change the fates of nations—but now power greatness was exercised through the process of economic integration. The fourth section of the chapter will show how a series of mistakes and developments on the ground put an end to the attempt to educate Europe and led to a new discursive turn in Russia’s identities. In particular, it will be argued that the events in Ukraine created the link between the economic and security dimensions. Russia’s suspicion of EU economic policies poisoned the security dimension and prompted Russia to move against the Ukraine and Europe. [Sections 7.5](#) and [7.6](#) will show how the response of the European Union and its major leaders constituted an external shock that made Putin reconsider his attitudes towards the idea of Europe. In terms of methodology, I will proceed in a similar manner. The discourse analysis will be based on articles, statements, and programmatic documents in Russia. Finally, to identify how identity discourses affected Russian foreign policy I will use secondary sources on Russian foreign policy triangulated through interviews with Russian and European diplomats in addition to policy-makers. In the conclusion, I will provide some reflections on the evolution of Russian-European relations in this period and will try to relate them to broader issues of international relations and the social sciences.

7.1 NEW GREATNESS: IDENTITY, DISCOURSE, AND AGENCY

Educating Civilising Europe in the conflict zones of Moldova and Georgia could have remained a more or less long-term Russian policy concerning Europe. However, V. Putin—when elected President of Russia—set off a new trend, which was bound to gradually change the

mechanisms of Russian-European identity construction and, consequently, affect Russian-European relations. Namely, V. Putin introduced the economic dimension into the discourse of Russia's greatness and its foreign policy programme. Overall the use of economic issues in the debate on foreign policy was not something new. But Putin's project was distinct in one very important regard. While the Soviet and early Russian discourses perceived the relationship between internal and external politics through the dichotomy of "greatness (military might) vs. prosperity/consumption", Putin's discursive project of Russian identity refused to play by the rules set up by pre-existing cognitive structures and sought to use them creatively, effectively breaking the antagonistic relationship between "greatness and economic prosperity". Rather, Putin tried to fuse them together into one single value/goal from his first days in office.

The link between the idea of greatness and Russia's statehood was re-introduced by the newly elected President Putin who, in 2002, when speaking about his political programme for the development of the country, stressed that Russia would be either great or nothing (*velikoi ili nikakoi*).¹ He added a novelty when he borrowed one element of liberal discourse, the imperative of economic development. To substantiate his claims V. Putin used the historical argument to link a strong economy to great powerhood and survival of the state.² What was important is that Putin used the same criteria of greatness that we identified in the discourses of the 1960s. Arguing for a new idea of greatness, Putin said that Russia needs to be competent, moral, and strong. The difference from the Soviet discourse was that the idea of self-sacrifice was absent from this new concept of great powerhood. And the economy was more pronounced.³ A year later while introducing his liberal measures, Putin made similar historic references to the Russian Empire to argue that, historically, Russia's status of a great power was buttressed by the values of the gold Imperial Rouble.⁴

The difference from the liberal discourse of the early 1990s was that it did not contrapose greatness against wasted self-sacrifice as represented by the economic hardship of the late Soviet Union. Putin's ideology removed the tension between greatness and prosperity and made them complementary. But what remained from the Soviet discourse in Putin's political programme was that he and his associates still constructed this prosperity, well-being, and modernisation as something that should be achieved through tough competition.⁵ One of his associates, Leonid Poliakov, a member of the Public Council of the Presidium of the General Council of

the "United Russia", tried to deconstruct the dilemma of greatness versus prosperity by saying:

Some argue now that we should choose "either we have a world power or we have a good food." So it can't be like this. Only major, significant world powers can have good food. All the rest are sitting on the margins of the road. This is our major battle.⁶

The liberal economic policies pursued by V. Putin in his first Presidential term, and praised by a number of Western observers, demonstrate a genuine belief in this discourse. However, the pursuit of Western normalcy had serious inherent problems. Even though Putin's move bore a great promise that Russia would reconsider its existence, would refuse its great Powerhood through crises, and reinvent itself as a superpower through economic and energy terms, there was still one fundamental problem with this new identity as the Russian president defined it. The fact that President V. Putin introduced this concept with the link to fierce competition created a very serious tension under the foundation of EU-Russia relations. Before this point, Moscow perceived the EU to be mostly a benevolent actor. For Moscow, the EU was either a representation of True Europe in the making—even if lacking in willpower and military capabilities and burdened with some elements of Civilising Europe—or it created expectations that a new True Russia, and the potentially True Europe (the EU), could live in genuine harmony, not tainted by any sort strategic bargaining or egoistic considerations. It was expected therefore that, in the economic field, the EU would be an honest and fair trading partner. These expectations were dispelled when President V. Putin spoke about the self-interested character of the EU's foreign policy as it was displayed in Russian-European economic relations. Significantly, the Russian President fused together examples of various EU policies in different sectors to demonstrate that the EU sometimes proceeded as an egoistic self-interested, manipulative, Sinful Europe.

We often hear about liberal values in the economy when it comes to demanding that Russia grant some privileges and preferences... Russia, perhaps for the first time in 80 years, has a potential to export grain, 5 million tonnes. What happened? The European Union immediately made the decision to introduce what amounts to a prohibitive duty... What happened next? Our colleagues are smart guys and they proceeded

competently, energetically and consistently. Realising that we would use this grain in livestock breeding, which makes Russian livestock more competitive, they granted extra subsidies to livestock breeders in Europe. What has that got to do with a liberal economy?⁷

The quote demonstrates that in the economic dimension, Russia started too construe the EU as a representation of Sinful Europe. It was competent, strong, and immorally egoistic. The construction of the EU as Sinful Europe in this and other sectors, such as energy, demonstrates that, although Putin proclaimed the course of liberal reform and a new greatness of the country, the EU had lost any moral or, subsequently, normative superiority. Additionally, the economic dimension acquired political meaning. Comparing negotiations of EU-Russia trade relations in the 1990s with those in the 2000s is suggestive in this regard. Even though in the 1990s Russia conducted tough negotiations with the EU on Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, these talks had always remained below the political radar. The early Putin's years were the period of tough rhetorical stand-offs, diplomatic manoeuvres, and bargaining between Russia and the EU in the economic domain. For example, even though Russia did not oppose the EU Enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, Russia raised a number of specific concerns mostly pertaining to economic issues as early as 2001. The long period of negotiations allowed for the resolution of most of these.⁸ At the same time, Moscow remained alert to any other attempts of the EU to outsmart Russia in the economic domain. The link between economics and politics was gradually emerging in Russian thinking.

As a result, Russia started interpreting traditional EU policies to various regions not as "regional approaches" or "conflict-resolution tool", but as a tool for political expansion. One of the first examples was the launch of the European Neighbourhood policy. Russia refused to participate because Brussels introduced it unilaterally and adopted a take it or leave it approach.⁹ Even though the EU tried to address Russia's concerns by developing a new and wider basis for the relations in the form of Four Common Spaces at the 2003 St. Petersburg EU–Russia Summit, Moscow tried to limit ENP's geographic and functional scope. For example, Russia exerted pressure on some EU Member States in order to limit to scope of the ENP. When Georgian diplomats tried to convince Athens (Greece had the rotating EU Presidency) to expand the European Neighbourhood Policy to the Caucasus in 2003, Greek diplomats refused to support the

Georgian initiative. Although Athens had very close ties with Tbilisi, the Greek side hinted at the fact that it was part of a deal with Russia: keeping the EU from active expansion in the Black Sea region *vs.* Russia's support in the vote on Cyprus in the UN Security Council.¹⁰ Similar tactics were applied to Russian-European interactions in the multilateral fora of the Black Sea region. Russia and Greece have been most active in the multilateral Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), which is comprised of the littoral states and a number of adjacent countries. Overall, Moscow sought deeper engagement of the BSEC with the EU in the region. But once the EU came up with a unilateral regional approach, Black Sea Synergies, Moscow stated it would not accept a new regional approach that was to be EU-dominated.¹¹ The Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, explicitly stressed that Russia and the BSEC Member States expected the EU to associate itself with the efforts made within the framework of this organisation.¹²

The situation became more tense when the EU introduced its Eastern Partnership approach, which Lavrov specifically attributed a hidden geopolitical agenda to the EU, one of non-democratic tactics aimed at excluding Russia from the European architecture.

With you [EU] we have the four roadmaps to build the four common spaces, and we stated in that very important document that integration processes in all Soviet space and in the European Union should be compatible, they should not be mutually exclusive they should be mutually supportive... We are accused of trying to have spheres of influence. What is Eastern Partnership? Is it a sphere of influence, including Belarus, which you care so much about? We would like to understand. And when my good friend [Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg] publicly says that if Belarus recognises Ossetia it could forget about the Eastern Partnership. Is it threatening, is it blackmail or is it democracy at work...? So we were told originally that the Eastern Partnership is about cooperation with Russian participation at some point. And then after those type of statements we have questions—is it about forcing countries to make decisions which they are supposed to take freely?¹³

Gradually, the economic dimension became the element that poisoned Russian-European relations. Often Russian analysts construed the ENP and EaP as a re-partition of the market through administrative means. And so the European Union was all the more perceived as an egoistic actor—either competent (Sinful Europe) or even petty and silly (False Europe).

The growth of the Russian economy and prosperity reduced the comparative advantage of Europe and pushed the False Europe type of interpretations further. For example, President V. Putin personally made strong statements that described Europe as a place where one can only buy consumer goods and cheap accessories.^{14,15} Another example of such interpretations was Putin’s close relationship with several leading European politicians, who upon their retirement from their office received well-paid positions for the Russian oil companies. It is noticeable that President V. Putin often used one of them—former German Chancellor Gerhardt Schroeder—as an example of False Europe—greedy, petty, and incompetent. He repeatedly brought G. Schroeder to the meetings of the Commonwealth of Independent States and treated him in a humiliating manner to demonstrate the corruptness of False Europe and to dispel the powerful image of Europe in the eyes of colleagues in the post-Soviet space.

All these interpretations suggest a striking conclusion. From the early 2000s, Moscow began to view the EU as Sinful Europe—competent, technologically advanced, but prone to unethical moves. To repel Sinful Europe’s encroachment into its Near Abroad, Russia used a mirroring strategy, launching its own integration project, the Eurasian Economic Union, and applied administrative means (economic pressure) to induce post-Soviet states to join the Russia-led integration project. Even though the logic of competition prevailed in economics, the two counterparts tried to keep the economic dimension separate from international security. A collaborative habit in the security domain pushed Russia to keep security interactions separate and maintain collaboration in this sphere, despite the growing sense of geo-economic competition. However, this half-hearted approach failed both actors because it caused them to neglect a fundamental cognitive shift in how each dealt with the other.

7.2 THE END OF “TRUE EUROPE”: CONSTRUCTIVISM UNLEASHED

Another important trend, which was set off at the turn of the twenty-first century, was the fundamental cognitive shift in Russia’s perception of the very idea of Europe. The understanding that the European Union was a project in the making, prone to its problems and mistakes, led to further reflections about the nature of Russia’s perception of Europe. Various

Russian officials, who were interested in the role of the idea of Europe in Russian history, started to question the process of Russian-European relational identity construction. Several examples can attest to the growing influence of Russian policy-makers who adopted Western epistemological approaches for their own political purposes. For example, the Head of the Russian Duma Committee for International Affairs, Konstantin Kosachev, stressed that "for someone in the West, it was much easier to consolidate Western positions by contraposing the West to the Other, with Russia in the role of this Other". It is interesting that in this article Kosachev presented Europe as a benevolent but incompetent and arrogant dictator—the precise definition of Civilising Europe.¹⁶ Another vocal discursive entrepreneur was Putin's closest associate, Vyacheslav Surkov, the author of the concept of sovereign democracy, which constituted a real discursive threat to the European normative of hegemony. It was presented as a meaningful but legitimate difference, to use Hopf's terms.

Another high-flying officer of Putin's circle, Vitaly Ivanov, went even further in using Western academic discourse to deconstruct the entire idea of True Europe. Ivanov argued:

"Russia's quest of 'true' Europe would exclude any possibility for the status of great power and that Russia would have to present itself as another 'Europe'".

According to Ivanov, Russia would need to pursue a strategy of cooperating and borrowing from Europe, but stressed at the same time that Russia was the "real" True Europe, and it would remain so. "If we are successful," concludes Ivanov, "one day we will become the 'true', 'most successful' Europe because the 'true' is the one who is successful".¹⁷ One of the most striking pieces of evidence to this fundamental cognitive shift was the author's experience of interviewing Russian policy-makers, many of whom were fully conversant with the Neumann and Hopf's concepts. They used these concepts creatively and argued that Russia should go beyond the existing cognitive Self-Other structures and present its own model of Europe based on liberal-conservative values. This interesting fusion of liberalism (free trade) and conservatism (political realism, geo-economics, and the mindset of spheres of influence) that Russia produced for its own consumption became one of the major game changers in Russian-European relations.

Beginning in 2008, the constructivist turn in Russian foreign policy became explicit in policy documents. Russia's survey of foreign policy explicitly stated Moscow's intention to redefine a new United Europe through closer cooperation with European countries. Following this

deconstruction of the idea of Europe, Russian foreign policy choices were modified and stated openly in the 2008 Survey of the Russian Federation’s Foreign Policy:

Work in the European sector calls for renewed approaches, oriented towards moulding a new quality of relations. This is due to both the strengthened positions of Russia and the fact that the main European and Euro-Atlantic associations, the EU, CoE, OSCE and NATO, are going through a period of transformation, as they search for their respective niches in a changed international setting. In these conditions the fulcrum of Russian policy on the European continent is its bilateral relations where the economy, politics, the social sphere, cultural issues, and contacts between people are present. The realization of the potential of bilateral links must help us decide on the scale of priorities regarding the multilateral organizations [bold in the original].¹⁸

As a result Russia has engaged in conflict resolution collaboration with the EU only through and after initiatives of major EU Member States, such as France, which invited Russia to contribute to conflict management operation in Sudan, Chad, and the Central African Republic.¹⁹ At the same time, Moscow refused to participate in the EU mission in Mali, an offer extended by EU institutions.²⁰ This type of behaviour became even more pronounced when Russia started to look ever more condescendingly at the EU representatives in the Geneva talks on Georgia. During some of the meetings, a Russian representative asked his French counterpart why they needed to bring President of the European Commission, who was nothing but a high-flying bureaucrat.

This reflective shift remained shallow, however, because Russian policy-makers managed to critically reflect only on the role of the “True (positive, progressive) Europe” in Russia’s perception. No proper reflection, however, was given to the fact that Russia still used one of its European Others as a model for emulation. Putin’s conservative ideology was based on the idea of conservative European values. Furthermore, even though Russia used this model, it remained, to a great extent, more of an exercise of ideological rhetoric than a real belief for Russian elites. For example, as one of the leading Russian experts and former Kremlin insider stated, a high level of professed Orthodox Christian piety was coupled with promiscuity and absolute tolerance to the homosexual community in the Kremlin.²¹ Propaganda of humility and service to the Motherland was

contrasted with the grandeur of neo-imperial symbolism, exuberant spending by top Russian bureaucrats and friends of V. Putin. This was coupled with declared commitments to save capitals and families in European cities rather than in Russia. So Russian elites were less consistent in following the European model in internal ideological affairs, but in international affairs the negative European Other—conservative and egoistic—was gradually becoming the new model for emulation by Russian policy-makers. In other words, what used to be the False now became the True Europe. In 2009–2011, Russia engaged in competitive geo-economic behaviour by building Russia-led integration initiatives in order to claim itself to be equal with Europe. This effort, and its failure in the case of Ukraine, will be discussed below.

7.3 UKRAINIAN CRISIS 1: RUSSIA, EUROPE, AND CRIMEA

Even though some analysts tend to discard Putin's Eurasian project as an instrument of geopolitical pressure and restoration of the Russian Empire, it has been something more than just a geopolitical instrument for Moscow. Eurasian integration was another attempt to become like Europe. To be like Europe—or its driving engine Germany—Russia badly needed its own integration scheme. This policy has not always dominated the Kremlin cognitive landscape. On the contrary, after several failures to re-launch post-Soviet integration in 2000–2003, V. Putin showed less interest in this kind of project. During those years, he believed that Russia would be able to regain its great power status through one-to-one relationships. However, the ENP and EaP drove him to conclude that Russia could be better off if it dealt with Europe as the leader of a regional integration bloc.

The Eurasian Union, however, was not designed to become a competing bloc for the EU. It was an instrument of positioning Russia as a power similar to the European Union and an instrument of getting recognition from Europe. In the pursuit of this position, Moscow again displayed a mix of collaborative and competitive approaches. On the one hand, Moscow did not hesitate to sacrifice its economic interests, and it made significant concessions to Kazakhstan and Belarus in terms of voting rights and the redistribution of revenues from the common customs tariffs. All these issues were discussed and agreed upon by Russia without tough bargaining. Furthermore, all controversial figures, who professed cultural and civilisational Eurasianism, e.g. Alexandr Dugin, were kept away from

the project. But close associates with technocratic and economic backgrounds like the former Minister of Economic Development, Viktor Khristenko, were assigned to deal with post-Soviet integration. The EEA's institutional design was a replica of the European Union. Russia tended to treat the decisions of the Eurasian Court seriously. At the same time, when Russia recognised that the EU was ignoring the Eurasian Union, it again engaged in a series of competitive moves by deploying certain disruptive tactics. For instance, it coerced Armenia and Kyrgyzstan to come into the Eurasian Union. Even though the Eurasian Union looked like an alternative or even competitor to the European Union, Russia did its best not to escalate tensions into serious conflict. The Russian President repeatedly stressed that there was no contradiction between the European Union and Eurasian Union and spoke about creating a pan-European common market.²² Russian leaders, diplomats, and scholars repeatedly stressed that Russia played an important role in colonising this huge space and that now Moscow was basically offering Europe a key to Eurasia.

The rationale behind Russia's promotion of the Eurasian Union was more about boosting the status of Russia to the level of great powers. This mix of competitive and collaborative tactics can be best explained by this dual rationale of gaining Europe's recognition and acceptance of Russia's superiority. The more Brussels ignored Russia's efforts, the more suspicious Russians grew that the EU was hijacked by the Sinful Europe trying to torpedo any project that would bring Russia back to great power politics. One indication of this suspicion was the fact that the new doctrine of hybrid warfare, advanced by the Commander of the Russian General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, argued that new "hybrid wars" would be waged for resources and markets.²³ Even though V. Gerasimov spoke about a new nature of war, the conceptual framework repeats narratives of Russia's interaction with Sinful Europe in the Black Sea region in the nineteenth century, i.e. "industrial/developed (great) powers competing for resources and markets and using proxy wars".

Ukraine became an issue when the EU unwillingly allowed Russia's suspicions to grow thereby leading to conflict. The most conventional critique of the EU is that Brussels was not sensitive to Russia's grievances and launched the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, which triggered the crisis in Ukraine and subsequent conflict with Russia. However, this interpretation is highly problematic. Even though Moscow was growing wary of the EU-Ukraine Association talks and potential Deep Comprehensive Free

Trade Area negotiations, this was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for Russia's intervention. Were this the case, Russia would have resorted to disruptive behaviour against Ukraine much earlier once the talks had started in 2009–2010, nor had Russia invaded other countries in the Black Sea region that had signed the Association Agreement with the EU, e.g. Georgia and Moldova. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and the negotiations process leading to the EU-UAA should not be treated as the cause of the crisis. Rather, one needs to look into the series of events that had taken place in the region in 2010–2012, many of which re-ignited the logic of great power games in the region.

One major mistake committed by the European policy-makers was to tolerate Ukraine's drift from European values in 2010–2012. When V. Yanukovich was elected President of the Ukraine in 2010 he almost immediately violated a number of provisions of the Ukrainian constitution and jailed several opposition figures. Even though Brussels and a host of European capitals expressed concern about rigged elections and the suppression of free speech, they chose to carry on negotiations with V. Yanukovich. Even though the Association Agreement and Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Area would have had a strong societal impact and bring about long-term change, EU policy makers failed to consider how such deals would affect Russia's perception of Europe. For Moscow, who tended to perceive Europe in less nuanced and holistic terms, the fact that the EU chose to negotiate the Association Agreement and Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Area with V. Yanukovich and his non-European practices suggested that the EU was no longer idealistic value-driven Civilising Europe, promoting democracy in Ukraine, but a rapacious Sinful Europe, which tried to tear Ukraine apart from Russia. Mirroring Europe's methods in the region V. Putin decided to exert pressure on Ukraine. In June–July 2013, a massive trade war was launched by Moscow against major Ukrainian exporters to Russia. A personal meeting between V. Yanukovich and V. Putin followed in August 2014 where the Russian president presented his Ukrainian counterpart with a clear choice, either accession to the Eurasian Union or a total trade war that would mean the subsequent collapse of the Ukrainian economy. To make his resolve perfectly clear Vladimir Putin threatened V. Yanukovich with violence. Needless to say, the limits of Ukrainian multi-vector foreign policy were exhausted.

This type of behaviour reveals another important feature in Russian-Ukrainian relations. By 2012, President V. Yanukovich made a number of

concessions to Russia that led Moscow to believe that a takeover of Ukraine would be just a matter of time. The Ukrainian security service and Ministry of Defence were controlled by Russian citizens. Russian military parades in the Crimea and intelligence operations across Ukraine were tolerated by Kiev. Yanukovych's rhetoric and the programme of the Party of Regions replicated Russian approaches to international politics. Ukraine extended basing rights for the Russian Navy in the Crimea and adopted non-bloc status. Interestingly, all these concessions did not result in more cordial relations with Moscow as one might have expected. Instead, Russian representatives, including President V. Putin himself, started speaking about Ukraine as if it were a failed state, ready to re-integrate with Russia. Even these statements were tolerated by Kiev as Ukraine was becoming heavily dependent on Russia's economic support. So, effectively, Russia engaged in softly changing the fate of the Ukrainian nation-state and expected Europe to respect this achievement. However, developments on the ground were changing the situation, and Moscow chose to blame Brussels.

7.3.1 *Perceptions, Butterfly Effects, and "Reality Bites"*

The Ukrainian revolution is an interesting case on how perceptions and local developments matter in Russian-European relations. Some authors attribute it to a clash of external forces. The pro-European narrative argues that Russia invaded because it could not tolerate the deepening European integration of Ukraine.²⁴ The Russia-centric narrative argues that the EU did not show sufficient attention to Moscow's grievances with José Manuel Barroso, the head of the European Commission, quoted as saying: "Russia's inclusion in the talks on setting up an Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine is wholly unacceptable".²⁵ However, these accounts tend to omit important local factors. There is a strong and growing amount of evidence that the Ukrainian revolution had little to do with the EU's aspirations for Ukraine. In fact, public demand for violent resistance against the Yanukovych regime had already been high after the first year of his term and was growing regardless of Yanukovych's negotiations with the EU. Several major waves of protests organised by small entrepreneurs and retired army officers shook the government even while Yanukovych pushed for a speedy and successful completion of the EU-Ukraine Association talks in 2010–2012.²⁶ The successes of Ukrainian ethno-nationalist parties, which performed increasingly well

even in the Russian-speaking areas of Ukraine, were mostly caused by the fact that they were able to resist the brutal force of the Party of Regions in the parliament.²⁷ Even though the EU and Ukraine initialled the draft Association Agreement, the legitimacy of President Yanukovich was melting.

The second important piece of evidence becomes apparent when one analyses the beginning of the Ukrainian protests. There were two distinct phases of protest, each driven by different forces. The first phase, properly called EuroMaidan, lasted several days before and after the EU Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius where Yanukovich was expected to sign the Association Agreement. These events were organised and led by pro-EU intelligentsia, who, in fact, organised rallies to support President V. Yanukovich in his pursuit of Ukraine's European integration. Those rallies were relatively small (20,000–50,000 people) and non-violent. A detailed study of the Ukrainian revolution shows the organisers of these protests had no real plan for Maidan 2.0.²⁸ Even though President V. Yanukovich decided not to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit on 28–29 November 2013, the pro-EU protests did not escalate and eventually faded away the week after. The game changer was the brutal dispersal of a handful of protestors by the riot police during the night of 30 November 2013. This pointless brutality against students triggered a longer and more violent societal unrest. This marked the end of a peaceful and non-violent EuroMaidan and the beginning of the Revolution of Dignity, driven by a broad semi-structured coalition comprising a number of factions, including ultra-conservative, nationalist, and even anti-EU forces.

Even though the Revolution of Dignity was the expression of much deeper currents in Ukrainian society, the events were still read in Russia as Europe's plot against Russia's great Powerhood. The fact that it happened after Russia demonstrated to Europe that it was able to launch similar integration schemes and even win Ukraine from Europe challenged its new great Powerhood project. The presence of European politicians at Maidan and the fact that EU diplomacy was led by a British politician, Catherine Ashton, suggested that the Revolution of Dignity was nothing but a plot organised by perfidious and sophisticated Sinful Europe against resurging Great Russia. Even strong efforts to stop the bloodshed and negotiate a peaceful transition, which were undertaken by the leading EU countries France-Germany-Poland in the Weimar Triangle, were construed by Moscow as the Triumph of False and Sinful Europe over progressive forces in Europe.

The Weimar Triangle was long considered the preserve of Warsaw and Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, and with his US background, he reinforced this type of interpretation.²⁹ Poland as False Europe featured in Russia's media discourse. False Europe was introduced when the Russian media and officials discussed the differences between "*Old*" Europe and *the New-Europeans*. According to Moscow, New European countries supported the US in the war in Iraq and pursued a nationalist nation-building programme, which was based on the victimisation of their experience in the Russian Empire and USSR. It depicted Moscow as a new imperial centre. In using *Mladoi*, the archaic form of the adjective *young*, to speak about *New European countries* (*Mladoevropeitsy*), Russian observers alluded to a term that had been previously used in descriptions of the radical nationalist government of the Ottoman Empire of the *Young Turks* (*MladoTurki*). Thus the strong link between False Europe and ruthless, barbaric nationalist policies was re-established once again as it had been in the historic novels of Pikul or Pankratova's textbooks. When commenting on interactions with the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia, Russians would often mention that, when commanded by Polish or Lithuanian representatives, the mission was more aggressive because of the pathological anti-Russian feeling of these nations. In response, Russia mirrored what it thought was the EU actions in the shared Neighbourhood—launching its own hybrid counter-offensive. "If Europe turned to dirty techniques in changing fates of nations, then we would show that we are capable of in this field".³⁰ Russia's pursuit of the right to change the fate of Ukraine, together with Germany and France, shaped subsequent events of Russian-European interactions in the East of Ukraine. At this point, the ability to decide fates of nations was already articulated as a clear attribute of Russia's greatness by journalists and experts.³¹ One could argue that from an implicit practical knowledge of Bourdieusian habitual nature, this practice was explicitly articulated as part of Russia's great powers role and foreign policy imperative programme.

On 27 February 2014, Russian special operations forces moved into Crimea. The invasion of Crimea reveals the prominence of Sinful Europe in the Russian cognitive landscape. Even the way in which Russia organised the invasion of the peninsula resembles what Russia thought were Western tactics in taking over Ukraine. The military operation in Crimea was preceded by a significant public campaign organised by pro-Russian networks in Crimea. Pro-Russian NGOs and parties campaigned against Euro-Maidan, which was branded as Anti-Maidan. While protesters in

Kiev, created their “self-defence” units, pro-Russian activists acted under a similar label, the “self-defence of Crimea”. Considerable efforts were made to legitimise these movements by throwing the support of local self-governance behind these movements. At the same time, similar to the situation in Georgia, Russia did not want the Crimean operation to escalate into a conflict with the EU. The task was planned so as to minimise significant bloodshed. The code name of the operation, “Polite People”, is quite suggestive in this regard. Much effort was made by Russian special agencies to entice Ukrainian troops stationed in Crimea to switch sides. Two major intelligence agencies of Russia—previously hostile to each other—the General Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU) and Federal Security Service (FSB, successor of the KGB)—worked closely together as never before to achieve this goal. GRU Special Operation Forces secured the area. The FSB exerted targeted pressure and offered financial and career rewards to bring commanders of the Ukrainian troops to the Russian side. In many cases, it was successful, but even Russian participants admitted that the local population was not as supportive as they had expected.³² When this tactic failed to pay off, Moscow gradually increased pressure on Ukrainian troops, but restrained itself from using military force and violence. The Russian militia—Cossack units from South Russia—were brought to Crimea and infiltrated Ukrainian military sites, trying to disarm the pro-Kyiv troops.³³ The Speaker of the Russian Parliament and Putin’s closest associate, Sergey Naryshkin, made personal phone calls to the then-acting President of Ukraine, Olexandr Turchinov, and warned him against taking any action on the peninsula. To make his warning more convincing S. Naryshkin threatened O. Turchinov that if Ukrainian troops fired a single shot in Crimea, the Russian army would land in Kiev and arrest the Ukrainian leadership for military crimes. As a result of this threat and the general demoralisation of the Ukrainian military, Kyiv did not provide any resistance.³⁴

The referendum on secession from Ukraine was organised very quickly and pushed ahead several times. Upon its controversial, but positive outcome on 16 March 2014, the new authorities of the peninsula lodged a request to Moscow for reunification with Russia and the relevant treaty was signed on 18 March 2014. Operation “Polite People” was concluded with Russia sending a clear message to Sinful Europe and False Europe that if Brussels/London or Warsaw decided to change the fates of nations through coups and revolutions, Russia would do that same. The practical

element of Russia's great power identity was a clear motive for such a decision. However, the representational part of Russia's great power identity played an important role in the case of Crimea. The fact that Moscow had deployed its best-trained forces and tried to use soft coercion methods signifies that it was important for Russia to prevent any bloodshed. Russia had tried to change, together with Europe, the fate of the Ukrainian nation. But it did not stage a civil war or inter-ethnic conflict. The fact that it chose to organise a referendum meant that it sought some kind of legitimisation for this move. It could not taint the Holy Grail of Russia with blood. It also expected that Sinful Europe would accept the rules of the great power game. However, the response that came from Europe was the first signal that Moscow was not dealing with immoral Sinful or False Europe.

Unexpectedly, "Sinful Europe" displayed a different type of behaviour. Even the most pragmatic German Chancellor A. Merkel defined the annexation of Crimea as criminal. The fact that Merkel resisted pressures from the German business community was another blow to Russia's belief that pragmatist and egoistic Europe would prevail.³⁵ France, Britain, and even Spain followed the same approach. As a result, the EU and the US responded with the first round of sanctions against Russia over Crimea. The fact that Europe responded to Russia's operation in Crimea not through the geopolitical or pragmatist lenses but through the normative approach showed Moscow that it was not dealing with the rapacious Sinful or False Europe. Instead, major European states displayed a strong commitment to the principles of international law and equality of states. In the same spirit, the EU demonstrated that it would not negotiate any economic deal with Russia over Ukraine, and this included one subject of great concern to Moscow, the EU-Ukraine Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Area. From the very beginning, the EU sent a clear message that there would be no negotiations on the EU-Ukraine DCFTA, but informal meetings and "discussions" took place to air Russian grievances. The implementation of the agreement was not suspended, but rather postponed for a short while. When it became clear that Moscow could not present any serious evidence as opposed to just rehashing old documents, officials of one of the most technocratic EU bodies—the Directorate General on Trade in the European Commission—made strong statements and walked out of the discussion rooms.³⁶ This occurrence was another "reality bite" for Moscow. When commenting on this development,

President Putin expressed himself in an unusual reconciling tone, trying to stress the need to continue dialogue. This shows that Europe’s decision to disengage with Russia broke some of the perceptions.

Despite the reconciliatory move, the EU and Ukraine signed the Association Agreement at the peak of the conflict in Donbas in June 2014. Even though some of the provisions of the Agreement were postponed, the EU made it clear that it would not negotiate the right of Ukraine to conclude trade agreements. The outcome of this response was two-fold. On the one hand, Europe’s move sent one more signal that Europe was committed to values rather than to great power politics. Once Europe refused to grant Russia the right to decide the fate of Ukraine in the economic domain, Russia was left with no other apparent choice than to return to the security dimension and re-engage with Europe in/through conflict-resolution efforts in East Ukraine. Unlike Crimea, other regions of Ukraine did not share the same sacred status in the Russian psyche. Therefore, events elsewhere in Ukraine turned out differently.

7.4 UKRAINIAN CRISIS 2: NOVOROSSIYA, MINSK, AND THE RETURN OF CIVILISING EUROPE

As with Crimea, Russia’s involvement in the East of Ukraine was preceded by an active media campaign. Anti-Maidain protests, organised by the local elites in regional centre in the East and South of Ukraine, were gradually subsumed by a new separatist project—NovoRossiya. The brand “NovoRossiya” is very suggestive as it alludes to a vast prefecture that the Russian Emperors created during the time of Russia’s expansion to the Black Sea and the Balkans in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. The very reference to this period suggests that Kremlin spin-doctors working on the project were emphasising references to the historical narrative of Russia’s great Powerhood, the period when the Russian Empire fought with the Ottoman Empire and dealt with European capitals in changing fates of the Balkan and Black Sea regions. One can identify that the practical element of Russia’s great power identity is far more important for the crisis in East and South of Ukraine.

Even though the start of the “NovoRossiya” project shared similarities with Crimea, it soon took a totally different turn. While the annexation of Crimea took place with relatively minimal bloodshed, the conflict in the

East was bloody. Conventional explanations for why the two scenarios developed with such varying outcomes attribute the differences to various exogenous factors and limitations. Ukrainian analysts argue that by April–May 2014 the Kiev government managed to stabilise its control over the military apparatus and mount a more effective resistance to pro-Russian separatists.³⁷ Others argue that Russia was put off by the international pressure and far less popular support as displayed by local populations in Eastern Ukraine. Therefore, Russia did not want to commit resources to the project.³⁸

However, all these explanations omit one very important difference in the way Moscow approached Crimea compared to South/East Ukraine. There were many similarities between the events in Crimea and East of Ukraine, such as rallies organised by pro-Russian activists and Russian agents, the capture of the administrations buildings and local police offices, referenda, and resolutions for local self-government. However, the main point of entry into the conflict was different—Russia did not deploy its best troops in the South or East of Ukraine. Even Ukrainian analysts recognise that Russia’s participation in the beginning of crisis in the East of Ukraine was limited to small groups of infiltrators from the Russian *spetsnaz* forces. The primary forces in Eastern Ukraine were local pro-Russian movements, which were backed by Russian paramilitary units and coordinated by retired intelligence officers such as Igor Girkin and Igor Bezler. This Russian tactic at the beginning of the conflict suggests that Russia’s main aim was not the annexation of the South-East of Ukraine. The manoeuvres of Russian troops amassed at the Ukrainian border were aimed at disempowering the central government in Kiev from taking decisive action to put down the rebellion. Chaos and state-failure could be the only immediate outcome of such policies.

The pursuit of a Ukrainian state failure can explain further Russian policies in spring-summer of 2014. When the Ukrainian army and law enforcement agencies managed to encircle separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia started to provide more significant, but limited support to separatists, claiming every time that no Russian troops were in the region. However, at crucial moments, the Russian army stepped in to save the separatists from crushing defeat. Even though the Russian army effectively invaded the East of Ukraine, it did not have the order to advance further westwards. A senior Russian representative at the early stages of negotiations, Vladimir Lukin, publicly admitted that Russia’s main goal in Eastern Ukraine was to support the separatist movement

only to the extent that Ukraine would feel bound to start negotiations with representatives of the separatist republics.³⁹ So Russia's main goal seems to have been to show Europe that it could not take away Russia's privilege to change the fate of Ukraine. At the same time, Russia did its best not to come across simply as an aggressor. Permanent policies of confusion and denial were deployed to depict the events in the East as an inter-ethnic conflict and to educate Civilising Europe.

This rhetorical strategy reached its apogee with the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17. Russian spin-doctors sent a wave of contradicting messages with the main goal of creating confusion.⁴⁰ This tactic provides further evidence of the limits of discourse over human agency in Russian foreign policy. When Hopf defined this discourse as Liberal Relativist in 1999, it was understood by a narrow circle of intellectuals who depicted the entirety of Russian politics as virtual/media reality. Critical reflection and the existence of multiple perspectives, which made the existence of objective reality impossible, was a central element of this framework. Twenty years later, official Kremlin propaganda adopted this discourse. While the Kremlin itself functioned more in the framework of Essentialist Russian, which contraposed the unique Russian way to its European Other, and New Soviet Russian discourse, which celebrated the achievements of the Soviet past, the framework still managed to absorb rhetorical strategies of the Liberal Relativist discourse. This is not to say that human agency is superior to discourse, but at least in this specific case, creative use of various discourses and a combination thereof reveals the degree of human agency in discursive struggle. Having armed itself with these discursive devices Russia decided to re-shape Europe so as to re-gain its right to change fates of nations together with Brussels.

7.4.1 *Negotiations and Return of Civilising Europe*

In March-April 2014, pro-Russian activists, supported by small groups of Russian *spetsnaz* and paramilitaries, captured the building for local administrations and policy precincts in the East and South of Ukraine, first in Donetsk then in the Luhansk and Kharkov regions. The Ukrainian army and law enforcement agencies were still too weak and allowed local populations to capture their buildings, block personnel movements, and even disarm soldiers, officers, and police. Separatist skirmishes began to grow in intensity. Trying to present itself as a mediator rather than as a warring side, Russia again attempted to depict Ukraine as a failing state.

This time, Russia chose to deal mostly with Germany. It was after Russian-German phone conversations in March 2014 that Putin approved deployment of the OSCE-based Fact Finding Mission.⁴¹ The initial phase of the conflict in the East, however, raised serious doubts as to whether Russia was a mediator or active participant in the conflict. The fact that the leadership of self-proclaimed republics, not to mention the armed forces of the newly proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic, was comprised of Russian citizens and spin-doctors suggested Russia's deep involvement.

At the first meeting of Foreign Ministers of the US, EU, Russia, and Ukraine in Geneva on 17 April 2014, Russian diplomats tried to add points on the illegitimacy of the regime in Kiev to the agenda. However, this attempt was also torpedoed by EU diplomacy, which refused to discuss the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary government in Ukraine. The final statement called on all the activists to vacate the captured administrative buildings. Given the fact that in Kiev most of the buildings were already free, the final resolution called on the pro-Russian activists in Donetsk and Luhansk. An OSCE Monitoring Mission was to be deployed to the region and was tasked with implementing the agreement.⁴² It might seem surprising that Russia agreed to delegate the role of observers and implementers to the OSCE, an organisation that bitterly disappointed Russia in the late 1990s. Nevertheless, this collaboration, in fact, reveals a fundamental change in the Russian perception of Europe and its effect on Russia's European foreign policy.

Even though Russia has formally endorsed the deployment of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in the East of Ukraine, Moscow's cooperative attitude towards the OSCE is driven by a different logic than that of the collaboration between Russia and the OSCE of the early 1990s. While in the early 1990s Russia, driven by the logic of reunion with True Europe, saw the OSCE as a partner and instrument for its genuine transformation allowing the OSCE to participate in resolving conflicts around and even inside Russia, today the OSCE enjoys far less credibility among Russian policy-makers. The case of Ukraine has shown that Russia cooperates with the OSCE with only one goal in mind—to use the institution for claiming more legitimacy and control on the ground. The OSCE is no longer associated with the idea of Europe.⁴³ In the case of Ukraine, Moscow provides the OSCE with additional leverage to better secure access to OSCE intelligence and shape its opinions.⁴⁴ As reported by pro-Russian separatists Russian officers (assigned to the OSCE Joint

Control and Coordination Centre), they used OSCE-marked vehicles to deliver armour and equipment to anti-government forces.⁴⁵ One of the Russian coordinators working on the creation of the Armed Forces of self-proclaimed republics, General A. Lentsov, also served as the Russian representative in the conflict zone's Joint Control and Coordination Centre. When necessary, Russian and separatist forces shot down OSCE drones flying over the zone of conflict. This attitude towards the OSCE demonstrates that the Geneva talks and OSCE deployment were unable to stabilise the situation in the region because they were used by Russia and self-proclaimed republics to promote their own interests. Thus, it is not surprising that Ukraine treated the OSCE with great suspicion and also sought to use the monitors to further legitimise their position as the victim of aggression.

Similarly, the Russian side did not treat the participation of the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy in the Geneva talks seriously. For a number of Moscow analysts, British Baroness Catherine Ashton, who refused to consider Russia's concerns about the DCFTA and who attended Maidan, represented a continuation of the policies of a rapacious Sinful Europe. The fact that Ukraine was supported by Poland and the Baltic states (pathologically Russophobic False European nations) escalated the conflictual dynamics. That Russia did not trust representatives of Sinful Europe was obvious when Russia sought to increase its control in the East. Despite the resolution, pro-Russian forces did not vacate buildings in the East and effectively expanded their control over the territory. In response, Ukraine—after hastily organised presidential elections—launched the Anti-Terrorist Operation. The Ukrainian army, internal troops, and militia moved into the region and gradually took control over significant parts of self-proclaimed republics. Russia's response was to increase the level of its support to separatist troops and even deploy Russian regular forces to prevent the military defeat of the newly proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. At the same time, Russia tried its best (1) to position itself as a mediator and (2) to bring itself and major European powers (Germany and France) to the table to discuss the future of Ukraine and Europe. Moscow also sought to exclude Poland and the US from this new negotiating format.

The escalation of conflict in the East drove European leaders—Angela Merkel and Francois Hollande—to intensify their activities and arrange meetings with the Russian and Ukrainian Presidents in Normandy during

the celebration of the 70th anniversary of Operation Overlord. Putin's reaction to the Normandy initiative reveals the same persistent element of Russia's great power identity: the pursuit to become an actor in great power politics and not an object thereof. When French President F. Hollande invited V. Putin to hold a separate meeting to discuss the situation in Ukraine, he agreed that there was an urgent need of such a discussion. The Russian leader, however, was reluctant to be presented or seen as one of the conflicting sides. In particular, V. Putin was irritated by the fact that F. Hollande also invited Ukrainian President P. Poroshenko to the meeting and was prepared to cancel his attendance. It was only dual pressure from Paris and Berlin that prevented him from cancelling his visit. Later on, the Russian side repeatedly sought to avoid any situation when Russia and Ukraine could be presented as warring sides, e.g. joint photos, formal mentioning of Russia as the conflicting side, and so on.⁴⁶ Even though Russia did not achieve all its goals it still agreed to maintain this negotiation format as it was the only forum where Moscow could speak to other European great powers. The situation with the Normandy format resembles the Russian-French diplomatic manoeuvres during President Sarkozy's mediation in the Russian-Georgian war described in the previous chapter. Russia's primary concern was to remain among those who decided the fates of nations and not the ones whose fates were decided even through international diplomacy.

Even though the first productive conflict-resolution steps were taken at the Normandy meeting, it was clear that at the initial stage of negotiations Russia considered both war and diplomacy as equally legitimate instruments of its policy in Ukraine. It rather saw the Normandy format as a process of great politics, performed through a series of top level congresses, rather than an institutionalised form of regular expert and mid-level conflict resolution negotiations. Driven by this idea Moscow did not invest much effort into institutionalising the Normandy process and making it deliver tangible outcomes. As a result, the top-down execution of tasks in the Normandy format did not work. Ministerial meetings merely reproduced declarations of the Meetings of Heads of State. The Group of Senior Officials did not set specific goals and benchmarks and expert level sub-groups reproduced only some of the declarations of previous senior level meetings. All the necessary work was taking place at the level of heads of state/governments and partially through the work of the Trilateral Contact Group set up soon after the Normandy meeting.

Given Russia’s position and escalation on the ground, in June 2014 Ukrainian President P. Poroshenko offered his 15-point Peace Plan, which became the basis for negotiations of the Trilateral Group. However, all sides engaged in diplomatic exchanges under the auspices of the OSCE. Several meetings of the Trilateral Group (OSCE, Ukraine, and Russia with informal participation of breakaway republics) were held on 31 July, 26 August, 1 September and 5 September 2014. On 5 September 2014, the First Minsk Agreement was signed. However, the very fact that it was negotiated and agreed on by low level negotiators—former Ukrainian President L. Kuchma, Russian Ambassador to Ukraine M. Zurabov, representatives of breakaway republics (effectively controlled by Russia), and the OSCE mediator Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini—showed that both Moscow and Kiev effectively used the meeting to explore each other’s positions and not to make serious commitments. All the warring sides tried to seize more ground on the battlefield hours after they signed the agreement. Neither additional documents such as the memorandum envisaging security and confidence-building measures (signed on 19 September 2014) nor structures such as the newly set Joint Centre for Control and Coordination (JCCC) could change the situation.⁴⁷ Hostilities continued until early 2015 when all sides, including Russia, realised that they could not reach their goals without escalating the conflict and decided to turn to intensifying diplomatic efforts (without entirely giving up military means).

7.5 WAR AND MINSK: CONFLICT-RESOLUTION IN DONBASS

Probably the most important difference between conflict in Ukraine and all other conflicts in the Black Sea region is that Ukraine was the place where Russia had to move to the conflict resolution phase without having secured the most favourable conditions on the ground. The events of 2014 and early 2015 showed that Russia could count only on a marginal support of the Russophone population in the South and East of Ukraine. These conditions would not allow Russia to expand the territory of self-proclaimed republics without escalating the conflict, and this would require higher level of engagement by regular Russian troops. This, in turn, would further undermine Russia’s narrative about an inter-ethnic conflict in the Ukraine and destroy Russia’s claim to be an arbiter in the conflict. Eventually, instead of control over the major part of Ukraine with the corridor in Crimea, Russia managed to slightly expand its zone of

control over several districts of the Donetsk and Luhansk region. Even though the armies of break-away republics succeeded in taking control over the urban areas of Donetsk and the symbolically important sites such as Donetsk International Airport and the major railway hub of Debaltsevo, it became clear that those were pyrrhic victories and that in the future neither side would be able to achieve its goals through military means, i.e. Ukraine would not be able to squeeze pro-Russian forces from Donbas, and Russia would not be able to expand its control over the entire Donbas region let alone the whole Russophone space of the imaginary NovoRossiya.

These developments led all sides to look for an exit strategy from the escalation of the crisis. In February 2015, Moscow accepted the mediation of German Chancellor A. Merkel and French President Francois Hollande. After 16 hours of negotiations, the Complex of Measures on Implementation of the Minsk Agreement (Minsk-2) agreement was signed. The fact that the most detailed agreement was negotiated by President V. Putin with his French and German counterparts reveals that it was now France and Germany that Moscow treated as the meaningful embodiment of Europe. Minsk-2 was probably the most detailed peace plan supported by the four sides. It envisaged a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy artillery, return of control over the border to Ukraine, amnesty for separatist fighters, and, finally, elections. However, a closer analysis of the institutional set-up shows that Moscow tried to use the Minsk process not to resolve the conflict *per se*, but rather to educate France and Germany through its Russian narrative. Unlike the conflict in Transnistria and, to some extent, in Georgia, where Russia was happy to interact with the EU, the conflict in Ukraine has shown that Moscow shifted its focus to the European great powers—Germany and France. Another important feature of this education was a furthering of control by the Kremlin, and personally President V. Putin, over the conflict-resolution efforts. If, in the case of Transnistria or Georgia, the Presidential Administration either provided only general policy guidance or stepped in with some initiatives, such as the Kozak memorandum on Transnistria or Russian-Georgian-French negotiations, ten years later, in the case of Ukraine, the Kremlin imposed tight control of and participation in the peace process.

The new nature of the Moscow policy towards Europe is obvious even in the institutional set-up of the Minsk Peace Process. The Trilateral Contact Group, the most visible site of mid-level interaction, remains a smoke screen. It comprises former heavy-weights or formal appointees, without much real political influence, such as former President of Ukraine

L. Kuchma, Russian Ambassador to Ukraine Mikhail Zurabov (unimportant in Russia after he was "exiled" to Ukraine), and the famous but controversial representative of small and neutral Switzerland, Heidi Tagliavini. Later on, M. Zurabov was replaced by an even less important diplomat, Ambassador Azamat Kulmukhametov, and the former Chairman of the Lower Chamber of the Russian Parliament, Boris Gryzlov. Appointment of these personalities demonstrated that the Trilateral Contact Group was effectively an imitation of negotiations and outlet for both internal politics and the media.

In fact, all the substantive discussions were located in a sub-group on political issues where "serious people discussed crucial issues".⁴⁸ In this sub-group Russia was represented by Ambassador Maksim Poliakov, who had good personal connections with the main Kremlin specialist on Ukraine, Viacheslav Surkov. The OSCE appointed a famous specialist on Russia, Pierre Morel, one of the architects of the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan for Georgia and EU special envoy for crises in Georgia and Central Asia. Ukraine sent one of its most experienced diplomats and politicians, Ambassador Roman Bezsmertny. In this case, the Ukrainians, who had studied Russian tactics in Transnistria and Georgia, were prepared to counter the Russian strategy of turning Ukraine into an object of great power politics. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin clearly stated that Ukraine saw this Russian foreign policy rationale.⁴⁹ As was the case with the Geneva talks on Georgia, Russia sought to reposition itself as a mediator in the conflict and kept refusing to speak to Ukrainian representatives, calling on them to address representatives of the Donetsk and Luhansk republics.⁵⁰ However, the Ukrainians tried to keep their focus on the Russian delegation and attempted to direct the attention of European mediators to the fact that representatives from the breakaway republics were unable to formulate any independent position.⁵¹

Another important feature, which demonstrated Russia's reluctance to resolve the conflict, was the further fragmentation of the negotiations space. Four sub-groups were created altogether, and if the Ukrainians tried to broaden the negotiation format, linking various questions, the Russian side appointed people from different ministries. This created numerous situations when a mismatch in approaches became too obvious. The Ukrainian side tried to coordinate the positions of its own representatives in various sub-groups, which allowed them to link other questions and formulate the new proposals in different sub-groups. Even though on the Russian Side Ambassador M. Poliakov effectively controlled and

instructed all Russian representatives in the Trilateral Groups and other sub-groups, Moscow tried to keep the work of all these units separate. Altogether, these made the various Russian delegations in different sub-groups less flexible and less creative compared to the approaches in Georgia and Moldova. Some participants noticed that Russian representatives became extremely stressed or dull, constantly reciting papers with pre-formulated positions. This all limited the ability of Russian diplomats to productively react to European and Ukrainian initiatives. For the first time in many years, Russian diplomats started asking to limit the time allotted for speeches to make up for the asymmetry in their rhetorical resources. The better-prepared Ukrainian representatives sometimes managed to frame negotiations so as to create ever more common points of reference with the European delegation. For example, Ukraine skilfully used the question of transitional justice and the French experience, or the exchange of prisoners, to position itself as a more European state. After the Ukrainian armed forces managed to stop the offensive of pro-Russian forces, Kiev ceased to look for a cessation of hostilities. Under these circumstances, Russia could not easily increase the intensity of the conflict to induce Ukraine to accept certain conditions of the Minsk Agreement. Given that Russia could not increase the intensity of the conflict because of concerns about sanctions, the Minsk process turned out to be the place where Russia's capabilities of educating Europe became exhausted. Still, the Russian president tried to use the case of Ukraine in his UNGA speech to show how incompetent Europe had failed in Ukraine.

Questions—like “Have you seen what you have done”—were often addressed and voiced by Russian officials to Europe, including President Putin himself, during the 25 September General Assembly of the United Nations. However, Putin's appeals seemed to fall on deaf ears in Germany. Disappointed with Putin's deception, Merkel and other leading German political figures changed German foreign policy to a more assertive stance.⁵² This strong rebuttal from Germany seemed to be breaking the existing pattern of Russia's perception of Europe. On the one hand, Germany had long been perceived as pragmatic—Sinful or even False Europe. But given the serious shock of the Ukraine Crisis, German policy had indeed changed, and now Russia had to come to terms with the return of Civilising or even True Europe, as represented by Merkel's commitment to values.

For months, Russian diplomats and President V. Putin himself tried to make sense of this new reality. A number of phone conversations and

ministerial meetings in the Normandy format resulted in some attempts to de-escalate the conflict. Namely, by late 2015, it was agreed that all sides would withdraw artillery of more than the 100-mm calibre. This decision, however, did not result in significant progress toward resolving the conflict. The Ukrainian side argued that separatist forces did not withdraw these weapons and continued to use them several times a day. Referring to these and other signs of Russia's reluctance to make a real effort in resolving the conflict, Ukraine refused to contribute to any freezing of the conflict and legitimisation of the breakaway republics. Even though some European observers tried to convince the Ukrainians to hold elections on the territories of breakaway republics, Kiev repeatedly refused to hold any elections before it re-gained control over the Russian-Ukrainian border and before Russian troops withdrew from Ukrainian territory. In this sort of situation of prolonged conflict, one in which Russia suffered from sanctions and the breakaway territories did not normalise (economic pressure from Ukraine and low intensity conflict that demanded that Russia keep troops in the region), Russia was not able to properly educate Europe.⁵³

On the other hand, the very fact that mediators started to use term “Russian troops” flagged Russia's victory in the information war. Russia's military participation was implicitly acknowledged, but did not provoke any similar reaction, as had been the case during the annexation of Crimea. All these demonstrate a striking change in Russian identity. The U-turn in Russian identity—with False Europe becoming the model for emulation—resulted in the fact that Russia's foreign policy was again replicating what Russia thought was the foreign policy of Europe in the shared Neighbourhood. Dirty tricks (such as hybrid warfare) and the denial of obvious facts are being now considered to be the new norm of Russian-European relations. However reprehensible, these tactics have been invented by Moscow as a result of mirroring what Russia thought were Europe's policies in the region. After the mistakes that Europe—whether Germany, Paris, Warsaw, or Brussels—made in dealing with Russia, major European policy-makers are now sending signals to Russia that it will have to deal with a Europe that is committed to values. If Europe decides to follow this path it has to answer two major questions. First, will Europe be able to maintain the necessary level of pressure on Russia to change its perception of Europe?⁵⁴ For the time being, Moscow finds it difficult to believe that there is still a Europe that is able to stand by its values. This brings up a second question. Given that Russia is prepared to create more

crises in order to “educate” Europe, is there enough resilience in Europe to withstand new crises on its periphery, inside Europe, or in transatlantic elections in order to educate Russia?

7.6 CONCLUSIONS

The chapter revealed two fundamental changes in Russian identity. The first change was Putin’s attempt to redefine Russia’s identity. The change was Russia’s critical engagement with the idea of Europe, which has produced profound effects on Russian-European relations. We should take both changes in turn and relate them to theoretical and practical aspects of EU-Russia relations. After humiliation in the Balkans and growing EU interest in the Black Sea region, President V. Putin still rejected revanchist ideas and sought to redefine Russia’s great power identity in the terms of what he believed was Western normalcy. This effort reveals a significant degree of human agency in discursive identity constructions. Putin undertook something that may be described in Hopfian terms as accommodation to the Significant Other. However, Putin’s accommodation was different from the accommodation pursued by Russian Westernisers in the early 1990s, who sought greatness by celebrating European normalcy (prosperity) and criminalising military might/self-sacrifice and the idea of competition in this pursuit of greatness. In his turn, V. Putin creatively fused these two concepts and sought to create a new Russiaian identity, which would see the way to prosperity through fierce competition and military might. This new concept of greatness shed light on the question of the relation between human agency and discourse. On the one hand, Putin drew on old ideas; on the other, he creatively (f)used the previously dichotomous pair to articulate a new vision for Russia’s greatness. This demonstrates that policy-makers and discursive entrepreneurs can break out of the shackles of pre-dated cognitive structures and possess a certain degree of free will.

This is not to argue that V. Putin was entirely free from any pre-dated discursive structures. In fact, reinventing Russia’s great powerhood by pursuing leadership in Eurasian integration somehow drew on the success of the European model. In other words, the launch of the Eurasian Economic Union was an attempt to instrumentalise positive features of European integration to claim the same right to decide and change the fates of nations for Russia —if now great power greatness was exercised through the processes of economic integration. So even though Putin

tried to escape the ghosts of the past, he was still affected by the non-reflexive and persistent element of identity—changing the fates of nations together with Europe. Moreover, the practical element displayed itself in the way Russia pursued this new type of greatness. Competing with Europe, Russia launched the Eurasian Economic Union, but also sought Europe's recognition of the project. Russia's enthusiasm for Eurasian integration was featured by the logic of competition and self-sacrifice. In attempting to make the Eurasian project a success, Russia did not hesitate to exert pressure and sacrifice its economic and political interests to bring in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine.

The re-invention of Russia's identity led to serious changes in Russia's perception of Europe. The European Union and, most importantly, the major European states were seen less and less as True (progressive) or Civilising Europe and increasingly as False (greedy and Russophobic) or as Sinful (perfidious, but very competent). With the economic dimension rising on the cognitive horizon of Russia policy-makers, conflict behaviour has gradually become a thinkable policy option. In this way, economic competition has become one of the enabling conditions of the Ukrainian crisis. It was not a direct trigger, however. It has been part of relations with Ukraine for about a decade. This did not prevent Russia and the EU from collaborating in areas of security where Moscow saw the EU as idealistic, but a benevolent Civilising Europe (the cases of Georgia and Moldova). At the same time, in the economic dimension, Russia mirrored Europe's policies by creating its own integration schemes, exerting economic pressure on its neighbours, and bribing and blackmailing its officials. This dynamic played an enabling role in the dramatic Russian-European conflict when the Ukrainian crisis erupted.

Another important finding of this chapter is that, contrary to what is often claimed by specialists in EU-Russia relations, the Ukraine crisis was not pre-defined by EU-Russian economic competition in the shared neighbourhood. Rather, a series of mistakes made by European policy-makers in dealing with Yanukovich led to the crisis. Since the EU chose to deal with a corrupt and authoritarian president, it was no longer the naïve, idealist Europe. Now the EU was considered a Sinful Europe. Even though the EU had little to do with the violent protests, bloodshed, and radical movements against Yanukovich, which were featured in the second stage of the Ukrainian uprising—all these events fell perfectly into Russia's dominant narrative. For Moscow, it was a perfidious and competent Sinful Europe trying to deprive Russia of its great power status through regime

change. Effectively, it put an end to Russia's attempt to redefine its own great power identity through Western normalcy (integration and prosperity). Security and violence returned to the centre for Russia's cognitive landscape. The annexation of Crimea and the hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine were the process of Russia's mirroring of what Moscow thought was the EU foreign policy in its shared neighbourhood. The events in Ukraine created a link between the economic and security dimensions. Russia's suspicion towards EU economic policies poisoned the security dimension and prompted Russia to move against both Ukraine and Europe.

A closer look into the beginnings of the evolution of the Ukrainian crisis points to a second fundamental and paradigmatic change in Russian identity related to major issues of social science. Apart from the fact that Russian policy-makers gained a more realist perspective on the European Union, as the body dominated by False and Sinful Europe, they also gradually gained a striking insight into the process of discursive identity construction and social constructionist theories. One could say that Western academic discourse produced its own Frankenstein—Russian policy-makers and diplomats started to use the terms “True” and “False” Europe and discuss not only EU-Russia relations, but also the very process of the Russian-European identity construction. This critical insight into Russia's own identity and the idea of Europe reduced the normative superiority of Europe and opened up a number of choices for Russian elites. “We can become True Europe because we are successful”, voiced by one of Russia's ideologues, is a striking example of this change. Having critically deconstructed the idea of Europe, Russia decided to redefine the European project through its bilateral relations with major European states. This strategy points to the primacy of human agency over discursive structures.

The second piece of evidence concerning that change is the fact that Russian policy-makers, while pursuing a conservative building programme, employed a Liberal Relativist discourse to challenge the normative superiority of the West or even confuse and deceive Europe policy-makers. Denial of Russia's presence in Crimea, hybrid and information warfare, as well as circulation of a number of confusing versions after the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH17 are some examples of this strategy, which was elaborated by the intellectuals in the Kremlin. This deconstruction and subsequent creative use of various ideas and discourses by Russian policy-makers allow for two important generalisations related to

fundamental questions of international relations and social sciences. First, this research has demonstrated that, in the human agency vs. structure dilemma (a pre-dating cognitive structure in this case), there are clear cases of the primacy of human agency over predating cognitive structures. Second, the fact that Russian policy-makers used Western academic discourse for their own political purposes demonstrates that, similarly to quantum physics, the very fact of our observation and research changes the object of research irreversibly. Moreover, unlike quantum physics, the fact that the object of our research hijacks our methodological apparatus and uses it for its own purposes reverses the relationship between the object and subject in the research on international relations and international relations *per se*.

This creative use of the idea of Europe and manipulation deployed by Russia has, however, reached its limits in the Ukrainian crisis. After confusion in the Crimea, Europe's response was an external shock, of sorts, that made Putin reconsider his attitudes towards the idea of Europe and the European Union. With two rounds of sanctions and the EU's refusals to negotiate with Russia, the fate of the Ukrainian nation has become that reality shock, which has shaken Russia's perception of greatness. Europe refused to discuss the fate of Ukraine with Russia. However, it sought to address Russia's grievances, but did not allow Russia to take advantage of its good will. All these prevented further escalation of the conflict and concentrated the conflict into a sort of diplomatic interaction. This interaction is, however, different from what was going on between Russia and Europe in the previous two decades. There were two reasons for this major shift in Russian-European interactions.

First, Europe's response to the operation against Ukraine made the Kremlin reconsider its perception of Europe. Russia had to believe that Europe—even previously pragmatist German—was committed to international law and sovereignty. This response swayed the pendulum of the Russian-European relational identity construction in the opposite direction. The fact that Russia is maintaining a low intensity of conflict and agreed to German-French mediation [without the participation of Russophobic (False European) Poland] suggests that Russia is trying to get back to business as usual—educating Civilising albeit naïve Europe. Similar diplomatic tactics were deployed at early stages of the conflict to re-position Russia from being on the warring side to mediator so that it could decide the fate of Ukraine together with the major European powers. This tactic, however, did not deliver the same results as Georgia and Moldova.

Even though some European diplomats sought to resolve the issue along the lines of the Transnistrian scenario—normalisation and reintegration—this time the object of great power politics—Ukraine—refused to play by the rules. While Ukraine failed to prevent the take-over of Crimea in early 2014, subsequent actions in the Southeast of the country have shown that Russia would not be able to use several important elements of these tactics. The Ukrainian government managed to stabilise the South of the country and regain control over major parts of the East. Eventually, Moscow had to deploy its troops to prevent the imminent defeat of pro-Russian separatist forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in August 2014. However, this success was pyrrhic as a number of identities emerged from the Russian soldiers. Consequently, Russia found it more difficult to present itself as peacemaker. Europe drew several red lines, which showed Russia that further escalation of the conflict would be counterproductive and bring no diplomatic benefits. Additionally, it became clear that Russia would not be able to coerce Ukraine into the most important concessions, such as legitimisation of separatist movements and regional government veto power in foreign policy decisions. These two concessions would be absolutely critical for “freezing the Ukrainian conflict”. So it looks like the Ukrainian crisis will NOT turn into another frozen conflict. It looks like currently Russia remains in the same paradigm of interaction—the only imaginable option to pursue—to maintain the conflict in order to educate Civilising Europe by showing the negative consequences of support for revolutions in the Black Sea region. This tactic, however, has exhausted its utility and is unlikely to yield further results. The potential outcome of such a conundrum will be analysed in the next concluding part of this book.

NOTES

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